

Were the Pilgrim Fathers ever tried in Boston's Guildhall?

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(A transcription of an article published in *Lincolnshire Past and Present* (No.60 Summer 2005) about the arrest of the Pilgrim Fathers in the town in 1607, together with the transcription of an article on Boston's Guild of St. Mary, that was also published in *Lincolnshire Past and Present* (No.65 Autumn 2006) about the Guild which built the Guildhall in Boston)

There is a widely held view in Boston and beyond that, in 1607, the Pilgrim Fathers, betrayed by the sea captain that was to take them to Holland and accused of leaving the country without the King's permission, were held in the cells and tried in the courtroom in the town's Guildhall. Thus the Rev H. Kirk-Smith, in his work on William Brewster, claims that it is 'still possible to see the old cells on the ground floor in the Guildhall, Boston, where some of the pilgrims were incarcerated during the trial, as well as the old courtroom, on the floor above, where Brewster and his companions appeared before the magistrates.'(1)

Kate Caffrey too, in her book *The Mayflower*, states that the 'Guildhall still displays the cells in which some of the pilgrims were confined'(2) and David Beale in his work on *The Mayflower Pilgrims* says that one can still visit the Guildhall and see 'the courtroom, located directly above the dreadful cells which held the Pilgrim Fathers.'(3) Our society's much respected Neil Wright also asserts in *The Book of Boston* that William Bradford, William Brewster and about 100 separatists..... were betrayed and, after a trial in the Guildhall, some of their leaders were imprisoned in the Gaol near the Church.'(4)

But what evidence is there to support such claims? There seem to be no surviving trial records, which might shed some light on the matter, and the only apparent account by anyone present at the time, that of William Bradford, is unhelpful. Bradford was a 17-year-old member of the separatist group that was arrested and went on to serve as the Governor of Plymouth Colony almost every year between 1621 and 1656. He kept a journal between c1630 and c1650, which remained in manuscript form for many years, but was eventually published as *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

Bradford confirms that the pilgrims were betrayed at Boston by the sea captain and that 'searchers and other officers ... took them, ... rifled and ransacked them, and then carried them back into the town and made them a spectacle and wonder to the multitude which came flocking on all sides to behold them, ... they were presented to the magistrates, and messengers sent to inform the Lords of the Council of them; and so they were committed to ward. Indeed the magistrates used them courteously and showed them what favour they could; but could not deliver them till order came from

the Council table. But the issue was that after a month's imprisonment the greatest part was dismissed and sent to the places from which they came; but seven of the principal were still kept in prison and bound over to the assizes.'(5) Incidentally, Bradford's account seems to imply that he himself was not held, possibly because of his youth. However, of more importance is the fact that he makes no reference to the Guildhall, so that no certain link between it and the pilgrims can be established.

Pishey Thompson in his monumental work, *The History and Antiquities of Boston* (published 1856), avoids all reference to the Guildhall in relation to the pilgrims. Thompson seems not to have used Bradford's manuscript personally but to have drawn on the work of someone who had, namely the Rev Joseph Hunter (*Collections concerning the Foundation of New Plymouth* (1854)).

Thompson quotes from Hunter, who states that the sea captain 'gave secret information to the magistrates at Boston ... When they were taken out of the vessel, the authorities at Boston seem to have disposed of them at their pleasure. Some were sent back to their homes; others, among whom was Brewster, were kept for many months in confinement at Boston. The want of particularity in Bradford's Narratives, from whom our only information of the proceedings at Boston is derived, is to be lamented.'(6) Pishey Thompson seems to have been willing to accept this 'lack of particularity' and not make any unsubstantiated claims in regard of the Guildhall's connection with the separatists.

But just because we cannot establish a definite link does not mean that we cannot be reasonably certain that the pilgrims had a connection with the Guildhall. On the contrary, the probability is that they had.

As far as being detained is concerned, we do know that in 1607 there was a gaol in the market place (which survived until 1790). This would presumably have not had unlimited accommodation and would have no doubt been kept busy with its regular supply of Boston miscreants at the same time as the magistrates were trying to deal with the pilgrims, the bulk of whom were, according to William Bradford, imprisoned for a month. As there was quite a large number of separatists to consider, possibly as many as a hundred, this gaol would have been more than bursting at the seams! We also have reason to believe that there was a prison within the Guildhall itself. Pishey Thompson, who made an exhaustive study of the Corporation Records, notes that 'in 1552 it was ordered that the kitchens under the Town Hall (i.e. the Guildhall) and the chambers over them should be prepared for a prison, and a dwelling house for one of the serjeants.'(7)

William Bradford implies that the separatists were treated tolerably well and there is more than a suspicion that there were Puritan sympathisers within the town, including amongst its leading citizens. If they were given special treatment by the magistrates who were reluctant to hold them, is it likely to have been in the gaol with common criminals? We can of course only speculate on this matter, but it seems quite possible that the pilgrims, or at least some of them, were imprisoned in the Guildhall.

The case for them being brought before the magistrates there is much more compelling. The Guildhall passed to the Boston Corporation in the 1550s and the

Corporation became responsible for enforcing law and order through its courts. The mayor and four aldermen were magistrates.

Pishey Thompson confirms that the Corporation was using the Guildhall both as its place of assembly for public business and for the Quarter Sessions for the borough at the time of the Pilgrim Fathers.⁽⁸⁾ In 1590 Quarter Sessions throughout the country were given jurisdiction over all criminal cases, so the magistrates in Boston would clearly have had to deal with the separatists. In other words, it is almost certain that the pilgrims would have been presented to the magistrates in the Guildhall itself.

A careful examination of the Corporation Records may possibly enable us to establish whether the surviving courtroom or cells were themselves there in the Guildhall in 1607 or whether these perhaps replaced earlier arrangements just prior to 1660 when it was agreed that the sessions for both Kirton and Skirbeck should also be held there.

But the absence of this information does not prevent us from concluding that, although there does not appear to be any definitive evidence linking the separatists with the Guildhall (or any other building in Boston for that matter), the pilgrims were brought before the magistrates in Boston, they were probably brought before them in the Guildhall, and they – or at least some of them – may quite possibly have been imprisoned there as well.

Notes

- (1) William Brewster, *'The Father of New England' His Life and Times 1567-1644*, The Reverend H. Kirk-Smith (Richard Kay, Boston, Lincolnshire, 1992), p.87.
- (2) *The Mayflower*, Kate Caffrey (Andre Deutsch, London, 1975), p.32.
- (3) *The Mayflower Pilgrims: Roots of Puritan, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist Heritage*, David Beale (Ambassador-Emerald International, Greenville, South Carolina, USA, 2000), p.23.
- (4) *The Book of Boston*, Neil Wright (Barracuda Books Ltd., Buckingham, 1986), p.46.
- (5) *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, William Bradford (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1952), p.12.
- (6) *The History and Antiquities of Boston and the Hundred of Skirbeck*, Pishey Thompson (John Noble Junior, Boston, Lincolnshire, 1856) (Reprinted by Heritage Lincolnshire, Heckington, Lincolnshire, 1997), p.426.
- (7) Pishey Thompson, p.235.
- (8) Pishey Thompson, p.234.



Boston's Guildhall in South Street, Boston,
Lincolnshire

Boston's Guild of St. Mary

David Lambourne

There is evidence that Boston's Guildhall dates back to the 1390s.⁽¹⁾ It is currently in the process of being fully restored and should be open again to visitors during 2007.

For at least the last three quarters of its history the building has been under the control of the Boston Corporation. It was surrendered to the newly incorporated borough in 1545, so that it was only for a comparatively short period that it was in the possession of the Guild of St. Mary the Blessed Virgin which was responsible for its construction. But what do we know about this Guild and the people who belonged to it?

We do know that, during the medieval lifetime of the Guild, Boston itself enjoyed a position of some prominence. The town was not mentioned in the Domesday Book, (although Skirbeck was), but by the 1330s it had grown to become one of the richest in the land. Boston served initially as a seaport for Lincoln, but was eventually able to win a substantial portion of the overseas trade of eastern England, including that of

the highly lucrative export of wool. Moreover, the luxury goods imported into Boston gave considerable regional, even national, prestige to the town's St. Botolph's fair.

We do know also that the Guild became the wealthiest and most influential of those within this highly prosperous town and attracted many merchants and traders as its members. Though there were other guilds in Boston, including those of St. Botolph, Corpus Christi, St. Peter and St. Paul and The Holy Trinity, and at least a further nine smaller ones, there is no doubt that St. Mary's was the 'Gilda Mercatoria'.

We cannot be absolutely certain when or why the first guilds in medieval England came into existence or of their original design, but we do know that by the 13th Century those like that of St. Mary were either fundamentally or at least partly religious in inspiration. It was accepted that life on earth is but a passing phase and that Man's true destiny is in eternity. One of their foremost purposes was therefore to maintain chaplains to provide masses for the souls of their deceased members. But such guilds often played a vital part in their local communities as well. Certainly St. Mary's became the vehicle through which many who were ambitious and public spirited sought political influence within Boston. Members of St. Mary's were also involved in charitable works and played, too, a key role in helping to maintain the fabric of the parish church.

Much of our knowledge of the origin and early years of St. Mary's comes from the reply made by Peter de Newland, guardian to the Guild, to the King's writ of inquiry of 1389. The return shows that St. Mary's was founded on the first Sunday in Lent of 1260 by Andrew de Gote, Walter Tumby, Galfrid de la Gotere, Robert Leland and Hugh Spayne. Amongst its stated objectives was to maintain two priests in the parish church to say daily masses for the benefit of all members living and dead. Wax candles were to be burned before the altar of the Blessed Virgin and torches born at the funerals of Guild members. A thousand loaves and a thousand herrings were to be distributed in the Virgin's name each year among the poor of the town.(2) St. Mary's was open to anyone, male or female, who was prepared to take the strict oaths of admission and pay an initial fee of 6s 8d and an annual subscription of 1s. It is a great pity that, unlike the Guild of Corpus Christi, no register of members of St. Mary's survives.

We can be certain that the Guild was thriving by the early 14th Century and that it played a prominent part in the re-building of the parish church of St. Botolph, which was begun in 1309, as its own chapel was located in a prime position in the new building. This chapel, which would have been screened off and have had biblical scenes and representations of the saints painted on its walls, would have looked very different from today. Visitors to the church can, though, still see some of the old features including a carved piscina, a sedilia and an aumbrey.

In the medieval period most people were both illiterate and ignorant and relied on the clergy to interpret the word of God and tell them how to obtain salvation. Guarantees of such salvation came to be linked to bequests of money. Of course, individually, only the very wealthy could hope to endow a chantry and the majority could, at the most, afford little more than provide for prayers and candles at their funerals and on the anniversaries of their deaths. So St. Mary's, which in effect acted as a corporate chantry, would have done much to meet the needs of its members and in so doing help

to sustain the life of St. Botolph's.

St. Mary's Guild was incorporated in 1393 by licence from the Crown and this enabled it to hold land and property in perpetuity. The recent dendrochronology tests suggest that the Guild's hall may have been built almost immediately in response to this licence. A steady trickle of further licences purchased from the Crown show that many gifts were made to St. Mary's. Thus, for example, in 1393 Margaret Tilney gave a house and land on the east of the river and in 1447 Henry VI granted a licence to Richard Benyon and others to give to the aldermen of the Guild five dwellings, thirty-one acres of land and ten acres of pasture in Boston and Skirbeck.

The increasing popularity of St. Mary's Guild not only encouraged numerous gifts of money and land but grew further as a result of indulgences that the Guild was able to secure in the 15th and early 16th Centuries from respective Popes. Such indulgences ranged from a hundred days remission from penance for all guild members who were present whenever mass was celebrated aloud, with music, in the chapel of St. Mary (granted by Boniface IX) to five hundred years of absolution for those who paid their subscription fees and attended their chapel in St. Botolph's at Easter, Whitsun and on other Holy Days (granted by Julius II). In turn, such indulgences made the Guild even more attractive to would-be members and served to encourage further gifts of money, land and property.

By the early part of the 16th Century the Guild was both influential and prosperous and by 1520 its income was £545 6s 2½d. It owned a great deal of land and property in Boston and beyond and not only counted many of the town's important citizens amongst its members, but also individuals from elsewhere both within and outside of Lincolnshire. During the 1520s and 1530s it even achieved a measure of national fame through the choir it supported at St. Botolph's and its connection with John Taverner. By now the Guild had apparently also acquired many sacred relics and miraculous objects including a finger of St. Anne set in a hand of silver and gold, a silver and gilt case containing a part of the stone of Calvary and even a silver and gilt case, surmounted by an image of the Virgin and Child, which contained some of the milk of Our Lady!(3) Needless to say, such powerful relics and objects made the Guild's chapel at St. Botolph's a popular centre of pilgrimage.

In 1534 the Guild produced an inventory which gives a vivid and detailed picture of its buildings and furnishings. This inventory (4) is held in the Boston Municipal Archives and was recently on display at the Haven Gallery in South Square at the exhibition of 1000 years of Boston's history. The inventory includes a list of the contents of the 'Chantry House', which provided accommodation for the Guild chaplains and was situated in South End near the site of the Grammar School, of 'St. Mary's House' (i.e. the Guildhall) and of the chapel and vestry of Our Lady at St. Botolph's. It shows that the Guild held many valuable objects including hangings and banners, books, fine cloths, richly embroidered vestments and items of gold, silver and gilt, as well as the sacred relics and objects already referred to.

Despite its wealth and influence, the Guild could not survive the reigns of Henry VIII and his son Edward VI. However, its dissolution was a fairly orderly affair. When the four friaries in Boston were dissolved in the 1530s the impending destruction of the guilds seemed distinctly likely. However, the town of Boston was itself

incorporated in 1545 and held directly from the Crown under a mayor and aldermen and with its own recorder, town clerk, markets and fairs. Various officials of St. Mary's Guild became aldermen or councillors of the new Corporation, thus helping to ensure a strong sense of continuity in the affairs of the town. The letters patent of incorporation included a clause which enabled the officials of the town's guilds to transfer their lands and other possessions into the hands of the Corporation on condition that the latter observed and maintained all the charitable provisions previously made by the guilds. So, in a ceremony held on July 12th, 1545, St. Mary's, along with the other principal guilds, transferred its property to the town.(5)

The religious functions of St. Mary's did not immediately disappear, but survived only until the first Parliament of the more stridently Protestant regime that emerged under Edward VI. This regime abolished all chantries and guilds, so ending the life of St. Mary's and with it an important chapter in Boston's history.

(N.B. Subsequent research suggests that the reference above to Pope Julius II is incorrect and that it was instead Pope Leo X who succeeded him.)

References

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H.F.Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England* (1919)
N.Wright, *The Book of Boston* (1986)

Notes

(1) Recent dendrochronology tests on the timberwork apparently date the building to this period. It is just possible that the timbers had been used in an earlier building which stood on the same or an adjacent site, although there appears to be no real evidence to support this.

(2) The surviving Gild Certificates of 1389, including that of St. Mary's, are held in the Public Record Office. An analysis of these is included in the Appendix of Westlake, *Parish Gilds of Medieval England*, pp.37/238.

(3) It seems that the latter was held in great quantities all over Europe!

(4) This is in a roll consisting of six skins of vellum, 13 feet long, 10 inches wide. A transcript of the 'Inventory of the Goods of the Guild of the B.V.Mary of Boston, taken in A.D.1534' appears in the Appendix of Peacock's *English Church Furniture*, pp.185/212. This inventory is also extensively quoted by Pishey Thompson.

(5) However, this was not the end of the matter. All of the Guild's former property was confiscated under Edward VI. In 1552 it was granted to the Marquis of Northampton, although the new Corporation was able both to hold on to many goods and chattels and to continue to use the Guildhall. Northampton did not enjoy his new acquisitions for long though as, in 1553, he was sent to the Tower of London for supporting Lady Jane Grey. This created the opportunity for the Boston Corporation to finally acquire many of them for good in 1555.



Boston's parish church of St. Botolph
(the Boston 'Stump')



The Lady Chapel (formerly the chapel of the Guild of
St. Mary the Blessed Virgin), St. Botolph's Church,
Boston



St. Botolph's Church, Boston, South-East corner, exterior
of the Lady Chapel